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ABSTRACT

The Oakland County School District in Michigan is in its fourth year of sponsoring the Oakland Writing Project. Research concerning whether the activities are having a positive influence on instruction and whether students are writing better as a result of the project has been, for the most part, informal but important. Project participants have been asked to provide written evaluations of every aspect of the project. The information gathered from these written evaluations, as well as from discussions and informal conversations, has helped to improve the program. Ninety questionnaires were sent to everyone who participated in the Oakland Writing Project and the Macomb Writing Project over the last three years; forty were returned. Among the reported findings are: (1) Forty-two percent of the teachers said that they had started using response groups for peer editing and evaluation; (2) Almost half of the participants reported they had shared with their colleagues ideas learned from the project; (3) Thirteen were now members of their districts' writing committees; and (4) Seventeen have conducted inservices in their own buildings. Comments show that participating in the writing project has had a positive effect on students' writing. (DF)

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# Evaluating the Effects of the Oakland Writing Project on Teacher Behaviors and Attitudes: A Preliminary Study

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My comments on the kind of research I conduct will have more meaning if I provide you with a context of what I do professionally and the reason for this research. I work for a large county school district where I am responsible for programs and services in language arts and foreign language.

An important part of our continuing education programs is our sponsorship of the Oakland Writing Project, an affiliate of the National Writing Project. We are in our fourth year of operating the writing project and it is clearly the most successful and effective training activity in which my department has ever been involved.

Another important part of my job is to make sure that I have funds for the writing project and the various other activities I sponsor throughout the year. To do this I have to keep our board of education and administrative staff informed of activities.

In the process of informing them, I am often confronted with the following questions, "How do you know these activities are having a positive influence on instruction?" and "How do you know students are writing better as a result of the writing project?"

These are good questions, logical questions, and questions almost impossible to answer.

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Oakland county has 10,000 teachers and 190,000 students. Of the 10,000 teachers, 66 have participated in the writing project during its first three years. For the latent mathematics types that works out to .66% of the teacher, or in English teachers talk that is a little more than one-half of one percent and quite a bit less than one percent.

Again, those questions are important, but not questions that I can adequately research at this time. I fully intend to look at these questions at a later time. At present, however, I am still involved with the development and improvement of the Oakland Writing Project. I don't think it is possible to say that the project has had a significant effect or student writing yet across the county. Although I know in specific classrooms and schools and in a few of the twenty-eight school districts served by our agency the writing project has already had a positive influence on the type and quality of instruction and student performance.

In the last three years I have conducted a great deal of research on the writing project. This research, for the most part, has been of an informal nature. This informality in no way reduces the importance of the research.

I have asked the project participants to provide written evaluations of every aspect of the project. I have done this during the course of the four-week summer institutes and at the end of the summer institutes. The information gathered from written evaluations, discussions, and informal conversations has helped me to shape the project to better meet the needs and interests of participants. We have been able to focus our efforts and I am confident that as a result of our research the project has been significantly improved over the last three years.

I have each group evaluate the project at the end of the four-week summer institute. This winter I decided to send questionnaires to everyone who has participated in the project over the last three years. I was curious as to how they would evaluate the project and its influence on them some time after their participation. This time period varied. For some the period had been six months, for others it was two-and-a-half years or three-and a-half years after their participation.

Ninety questionnaires were mailed to past participants in the Oakland Writing Project and the Macomb Writing Project, our sister project. Forty of the questionnaires were returned; that is a 44% return rate.

The questionnaire had five open-ended questions:

1. How has the writing project influenced the way you teach composition? Please elaborate with specific examples.
2. How would you compare the amount and type of writing you assign now with the amount and type of writing you assigned before you participated in the Oakland Writing Project?
3. In what ways, if any, have you been able to influence the teaching of writing in your building and/or district? This might include something quite informal like sharing ideas with a colleague, or something more formal like conducting inservice training or serving on a curriculum committee. Please elaborate.
4. Given your experience in using the material and ideas taught at the writing project, what, if anything, would we do differently?

5. Please elaborate on any other benefits you received from your participation in the writing project.

After the questionnaires were returned the responses were collapsed into categories where the same or similar answers were grouped together. The results were very interesting, and at times surprising.

Let me give you a summary of some of the high-lights.

Question 1. "How has the writing project influenced the way you teach composition?"

a. 17 (42%) responded that they started using response groups for peer editing and evaluation
b. 7 (17%) stated that they began to use journal writing
c. 5 reported that they were having students write for different audiences

Here are the other areas that were mentioned as end results of the participation in the writing process.

d. 5--really teaching the writing process because now I understand it
e. 4--more sensitive to the problems of student writers
f. 4--using a greater variety of topics
g. 4--emphasis on lots of student writing
h. 3--not using a red pencil anymore
i. 3--doing more prewriting activities
j. 3--doing more with revision

There were twenty six additional categories with 1 or 2 responses.

On the second question, "How would you compare the amount and type of writing you assign now with the amount and type of writing you as-

signed before you participated in the Oakland Writing Project?" I got the following responses.

a. 12 reported that they were having their students more

b. 14 said about the same

c. 4 said they were having their students write less

It is interesting to note in the last two categories, most of those responding noted that although they were were having their students write about the same or less, they were having students do a much more thorough job on each assignment and that more prewriting and revising activities were being incorporated in each assignment.

Some of the other comments that were included in this quite interesting. For example:

d. 3 said their teaching was much more focused

e. 3 reported they were have much more fun teaching

f. 3 reported they were doing more cross-curricular writing

There were fifteen other categories with one or two responses

Question 3 "In what ways have you been able to influence the teaching of writing in your building or district?"

a. 19 or almost half reported that they had been able to share ideas and encourage their colleagues to use them

b. 13 said they are now on their districts' writing committee and most of these committees are involved in writing a new writing curriculum

c. 17 have conducted inservices in their own buildings or in other buildings in their school district

d. 11 reported that they have been able to change the approach used by colleagues to teach writing

e. 5 reported that they have done training in other districts

f. 2 reported that they have been appointed the writing coordinator in their district

There were four other categories with one or two responses.

Question 4. "Given your experience in using the material and ideas taught at the writing project, what, if anything, should we do differently? There were fifty-three responses on this question that fell into 42 groups.

a. 5 responded nothing different
b. 4--more opportunity to share with other participants
c. 2--wanted more structure in workshop
d. 2--wanted more opportunity to write
e. 2--wanted a talent bank of presenters
f. 2 2--would like to see more publishing

The other 36 categories had only one response each.

Question 5. "Please elaborate on any other benefits you received from your participation?"

a. 12--the opportunity to meet and get to know dedicated professionals
b. 9--becoming part of a network (support system) of teachers interested in teaching writing.
c. 8--having a opportunity to share ideas with interested colleagues.
d. 8--renewed spirit,resetting goals, being reenergized.
e. 5--the writing project confirmed my instincts, I have renewed confidence.
d. 3--cross-grade/curriculum helpful

There were 17 other categories with one or two responses.

Let me include one response to this question in its entirety.

"Main benefit: I've been totally revitalized in my teaching. I look forward to teaching each day. The students' attitudes are positive. Even those who still don't like to write admit that what they're doing is worthwhile . They just don't like the work. Thinking is hard work! I can handle and deal with that kind of complaint because the child is open--he/she sees the value of learning to think and write clearly. In the past the same student would have closed his/her mind with an attitude of "Why do we have to learn all this stuff (grammar, etc.) This is dumb."

These are the results of this modest research effort. I'm still a long way from being able to say that the writing project has improved student writing across the county. I am confident that in a few years we will be able to show that student writing has improved in some of our school districts as a result of the writing project. I do know that the writing project has helped many teachers grow, change, acquire new knowledge, new friends, and a renewed sense of professionalism. And I know that this translates into improved student performance.

This research will, however, serve to strengthen the Oakland Writing Project. I will be able to use this information in my efforts to determine the kinds of things that need to be emphasized, both in terms of content and process. In addition, I have a sense of how this survey can be improved and what other topics should be investigated.